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LENSWORK

Photography and the Creative Process • Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

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Essay

Frank Calidonna

Interview

Carl Chiarenza

Portfolios

Carl Chiarenza

Hal Gage

Luis Mallo



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29
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2000

Photography and the Creative Process
Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

Editors
Brooks Jensen
Maureen Gallagher

In this issue

Article by
Frank Calidonna

Interview with
Carl Chiarenza

Portfolios by
Carl Chiarenza
Hal Gage
Luis Mallo

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An Open Letter to LensWork Readers and Subscribers

LENSWORK GROWS TO 6-ISSUES PER YEAR!

Dear Friends,

***LensWork* is changing from four issues per year, to six issues per year** — a common bimonthly schedule. For us, this is certainly the most exciting news since we introduced the *LensWork Special Editions Collection* a year and a half ago. We've never been accused of moving too slowly! So, the issue you hold in your hands is the first of the new bimonthly publications.

Our next issue — *LensWork #30* — will be shipped for arrival to subscribers and retail shelves in early July rather than the old quarterly schedule of August.

In fact, the issue from last February is officially the last issue of *LensWork Quarterly*. With this revised and expanded production schedule, *LensWork Quarterly* will now be known simply as *LensWork* and will be published six times a year, in the odd numbered months.

A Note for Subscribers

Your last issue remains the same — it will now just arrive sooner than originally expected! Our subscription rates will remain unchanged: US subscriptions will still be \$29 for 4-issues, \$55 for 8-issues and we will be adding a new option, \$79 for 12-issues. This

new option for extended subscriptions represents a full two years. (For all subscribers outside the US, please see the subscription card for Canada/Mexico and Overseas rates.)

We're quite proud of the fact that we have been able to progressively increase the quality of the publication since its inception in 1993 and have maintained the same cover price now for almost seven years. Even with this expansion of an additional two issues per year, the cover price remains \$8.95 and subscription discounts have not changed.

Our mission is to make available great photography and creative ideas at affordable prices. We're delighted that you share our excitement about photography and thank you for continued purchase of our publications. Thanks to our subscribers, newsstand purchasers, multimedia patrons and *Special Editions* collectors, *LensWork* is one of the most successful fine art photography publications in the history of the medium.

With heartfelt appreciation,

Brooks Jensen
Editor, LensWork Publishing



EDITOR'S COMMENTS



When the Flock Veers Left

Bill Jay has made the point that he can often tell you exactly when a photography was made by being aware of the latest trends in image content. There was a time when a photograph of a cactus photographed with flash in the middle of the night was first done and within months there were a flood of cactus-flash photographs appearing everywhere.

As the editor of *LensWork* I can attest that Bill Jay was not exaggerating — in fact he might have been quite kind. A couple of years ago the fad was jumping dancers caught in mid-air poses. More recently, exactly as I had predicted, we started receiving a number of portfolios of portraits of naked prepubescent children in work hauntingly similar to Sally Mann's and Jock Sturges'. In fact, this is precisely why I came out so strongly against their work for moral and ethical reasons. It's not that I was so much against their having done it — but rather I feared the Pandora's Box their work would open for all the flock to follow.

I know that by mentioning such controversial work — and then expressing a strong opinion about it, God forbid — I run a

significant risk that the real point I am hoping to make in this article will get lost. Let me set aside the issue of photographs of naked prepubescent children and instead talk about something that is even more controversial — baby seals.

Some years ago while traveling in California on business I eked out a few days of vacation and headed for the true photographer's paradise — Point Lobos. Ben Maddow's book on Edward Weston had recently been published and I had been eyeing those gorgeous cliff walls, pebbly sandstone, crashing waves, dead sea life and all the other wonderful subject material that so obviously populated Point Lobos as some sort of vortex of photographic subject material. Wanting to spend the entire day there, I headed down to Point Lobos and arrived at the entrance promptly at 6 am to be greeted by all kinds of threatening signs and warnings to my life that entry was strictly forbidden until 9 am. It seems that one cannot gain access to Point Lobos until the baby seals have concluded their morning repast.

I love baby seals as well as the next person so I waited until 9:00. I entered the park and eagerly wandered the beaches looking

for those inspirational bits of landscape that Weston had made so famous. They were not there — at least I couldn't find them. At the time, I was convinced that it was a matter of light; I had been aced-out of the good light by the hungry seals. If the stupid baby seals had just preferred brunch so I could have been there at the crack of dawn, I was sure that I would have been able to create great artwork as Weston had done. Ah, youth is such a wonderful time for folly, wouldn't you agree?

Now that I am older and, I hope, a bit wiser I realize that *there is absolutely nothing spectacular about Point Lobos*. Point Lobos is no different than any one of dozens of state parks or roadside attractions that one could find in my own home state of Oregon. It's not that Point Lobos was spectacular — *it's that Edward Weston was*. Weston did not find a bit of magic landscape; it's that he was a magician in the landscape. Like so many, I had completely missed the point when I assumed that Point Lobos was the place to look for photographs. The same could be said of Yosemite, Canyon de Chelly, the streets of New York City, or any one of thousands of locales that have been so beautifully photographed by those masters who have preceded us.

In the southeast corner of Oregon is a bit of landscape that is truly spectacular. It has the majesty of Yosemite or the Wind River Mountains in Wyoming or Lake Louise in Glacier National Park. The Steens Mountains have Kiger Gorge, the Alvord Desert, the East Rim, Little Indian Gorge, legendary wild horses, gorgeous cascading waterfalls and more wildlife than can be seen in a lifetime. So why is it that so many Oregon and Washington photographers go to Arizona to photograph the slit canyons or the Bisti badlands, go to Yosemite, or, for that matter, to Tibet?

Consider this from a different perspective. Is it just possible that Ansel Adams' photographs of Yosemite are so exceedingly well done because he *lived* there? Is it possible that Edward Weston's work on Point Lobos excels because he went there, over and over, for years, in every season, every lighting condition and photographed and photographed and photographed it? I will never forget the shock I felt when I first learned that Monet, so famous for that wonderful impressionist painting of the water lily pond, had actually made a *career* of painting water lily ponds — *hundreds* of them.

There is a strange paradox at work here. On one hand I am suggesting that copying

the old masters leads to little of value. Don't go to Point Lobos because Weston had already done it so well. On the other hand I am suggesting that the masters became masters by copying themselves. The paradox is simply this: repetition of what has already been done is a useful technical exercise but rarely produces artwork of merit. Repetition of one's own creative vision however leads to refinement, increasing depth and sensitivity, and generally *does* produce better artwork.

Why are there scant great photographers from Kansas or North Dakota? Is it that there is no landscape, no people, no subject matter there worth photographing? There is an old, stupid rule of thumb in photography that says that if you can't photograph a spectacular image of a mundane subject at least make mundane photograph a spectacular subject. Is it that all the accomplished photographers in Kansas and North Dakota head to the Sierras, the national parks, the desert southwest or exotic Tibet?

I will admit here that I am expressing a certain personal prejudice toward photography. I have always felt that the artist who shows us the significant in the mundane is a better artist than one who only shows us the mundane in the significant. I'll go even farther than that. I prefer

the artist who shows us the significant in the mundane over the artist who shows us the significant in the significant! I prefer Weston over Adams, Joseph Sudek over Eliot Porter, Paul Strand over *Time-Life*, Norman Rockwell over Picasso, Charles Dickens over James Joyce, and a good home cooked meal over *nouvelle cuisine*. Fortunately the world of art is diverse enough that I can have my preferences and not be limited to them. (Sometimes Wagner is much more fun than Windham Hill.)

Let me conclude with some questions about Josef Sudek. When he photographed his kitchen table, his window, the little tree in his front courtyard, or the egg he was about to eat for lunch, I wonder if he regretted that his circumstances prevented him from photographing in the Alps? What if he had been born in 1990s suburban America instead of 1930s Czechoslovakia? Would he have photographed shopping malls, apartment complexes, civic and bank buildings, MacDonald's hamburger wrappers, and street signs? When Robert Frank, Lewis Baltz, and Robert Adams photograph such things, they always come off as somewhat sarcastic — as though the real intent of the photograph is not to show beauty, but rather to illustrate the deprivation of modern life.

You see, nostalgia is quite fashionable these days. It is easy to assume that Josef Sudek's pictures of his lunch were photographed in reverence but the reverence may only be our projection of nostalgia onto an image that had a totally different meaning for him. It's also quite fashionable to denigrate modern life. Hence we assume that any photograph of a MacDonald's hamburger wrapper are necessarily intended to express sarcastic irony.

Most artists, in spite of the myth of the isolated and tormented soul, are firmly ensconced as a part of a flock. It is just so easy to march to the drum beat of every-

body else's drum. By contrast, the best art comes from the true heart. Once technique and craft can be successfully used, the artist's real challenge begins — finding and producing from the true heart. The next time the flock veers left, try veering right, just for fun, and leaving the rest of the sheep. Wander off. Look for yourself. And if you find it difficult to make a decent photograph, know you are on the correct and best path that leads to the most important artwork of your life.



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*Terry Milliken,
Douglas Lake Cattle Co.,*
Signed by Jay Dusard
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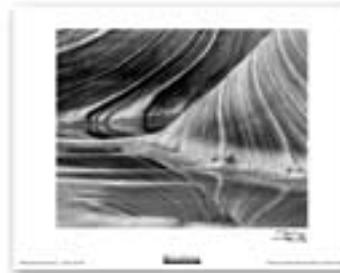
LWS 046
*Lonnie Jones, Cow Boss,
Gang Ranch, 1981*
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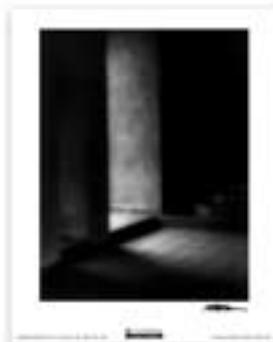
LWS 074
Adiantum Macrophyllum, 1991
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PASSENGERS



by

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several vertical, slightly wavy lines that form the letters 'L' and 'M'.

Luis Mallo





THE IDEA'S THE THING

Using an "Idea Book"

by

Frank Calidonna

We've all done it at one time or another — thrown our camera into the car and started out for a day of taking *great* photographs. Logging miles and becoming anxious, we look and look, but the entire planet suddenly appears too ordinary, too dull — certainly not the stuff from which legendary photographs are made. Not wishing to waste a day, finally something is committed to film out of sheer desperation. You already know the end of the story: boring pictures and a wasted day.

What you need is an *idea*.

Without the faintest clue why we're out taking pictures, it's so easy to forget the most important element of photography — the difference between photographer and snapshotter. Picking up a camera is identical to picking up a pencil. You must have something to *say* or you will merely scribble gibberish.

I know, *technique* is seductive. Your first efforts were fuzzy, low contrast, boring photographs. Now they are tack sharp



ALASKA

A Portfolio



by

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H. Gage'.

Hal Gage





INTERVIEW WITH CARL CHIARENZA

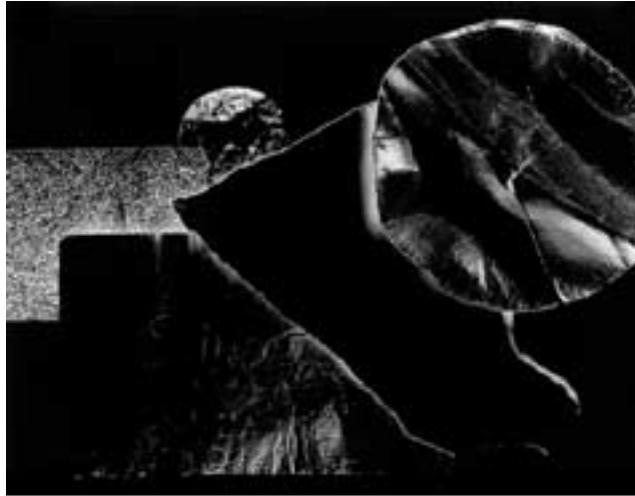
Editor's note: At the March 2000 Society for Photographic Education National Conference in Cincinnati, I had the opportunity to interview Carl Chiarenza. Chiarenza had received the SPE Honored Educator Award just the year before. He attended the event this year to celebrate with his former classmate, Jerry Uelsmann, who was named this year's honoree. Carl's lifetime of work and contribution to the field of photography places him among photography's true masters of the art. His insight into the creative process is both an inspiration and an education.

Brooks Jensen: Back in the early fifties, when RIT was first starting its BFA photography program, it must have been an incredibly exciting time for you and your fellow classmates. You were starting something that is now of such historic importance to photography. At the time, did you guys know you were involved in something that exciting?

Carl Chiarenza: Absolutely not! We went there with some vague idea that we wanted to be photographers — most of us without any notion of art. Some of us had some sort of art or music background, as I did, but mostly we were trying to learn photography with no specific goal in mind. Some wanted to go to RIT so they could get a job as a tech rep or an engineer or something at Kodak. Some, like Jerry Uelsmann, wanted to be a portrait photographer. Others came for training in various types of commercial photography — the so-called *illustration* part of the program. The rest was science and technology. People were motivated in different directions. Most of us were confused.



LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND



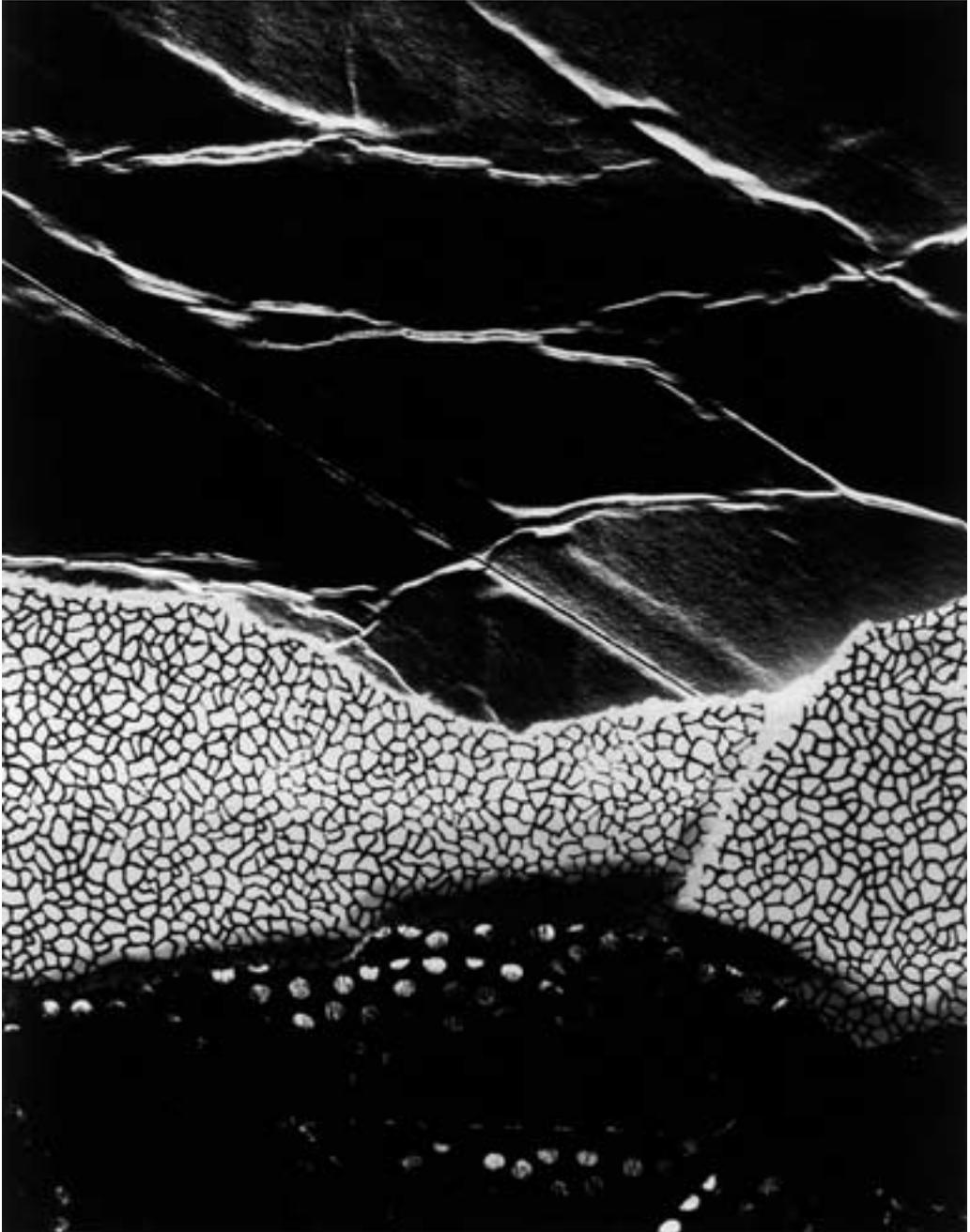
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Carl Chiarenza --

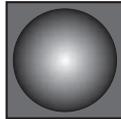
Carl Chiarenza

*Hear an audio interview with Carl Chiarenza and see more of his images
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